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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 001169

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STATE FOR SCA/FO (DAS GASTRIGHT), SCA/A, S/CT, EUR/RPM
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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [NATO](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: "OPERATION ACHILLES" MOVES TALIBAN FROM SANGIN
DISTRICT CENTER

REF: KABUL 1050

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann; reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: Since last fall, the Taliban presence in North Helmand had been growing, especially in the districts of Musa Qala, Now Zad, and Sangin. This Taliban presence undermined USAID's multi-million dollar efforts to refurbish the major hydroelectric plant located at Kajaki Dam -- an issue of strategic interest to Afghan reconstruction and development efforts. Beginning in early March, ISAF and ANSF began to increase the pressure on the Taliban in North Helmand with the commencement of shaping operations under Operation Achilles. On April 8, ISAF and ANSF forces retook the Sangin District Center from the Taliban and captured weapons caches (including significant amounts of IED materials). The GoA has moved in a significant number of Afghan police to help hold the area. The retaking of Sangin is a major success for ISAF and the GoA, but, in order to sustain this victory, the GoA must address the vacuum in governance in Helmand. We are working with ISAF to encourage senior GoA leaders to visit Sangin soon, to emphasize the government's engagement on the development/reconstruction front and to reinforce our Comprehensive Approach to combating the insurgency. End Summary.

SANGIN: KEY GROUND IN NORTH HELMAND

¶2. (S/NF) Since last fall, the Taliban presence in North Helmand had been growing, especially in the districts of Musa Qala, Now Zad, and Sangin. The Taliban took advantage of thinly spread ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to increase their strength in the area. By increasing their presence in this corner of North Helmand, the Taliban were able to control much of the road leading up to the Kajaki hydroelectric dam. This Taliban presence undermined USAID's multi-million dollar efforts to refurbish the major hydroelectric plant located at Kajaki Dam (as well as other USAID and international development efforts in the area). When the project is completed, the hydroelectric plant will

provide a reliable source of electricity to nearly two million Afghans in the South and create jobs -- it is a project of strategic interest to Afghan reconstruction and development efforts. Sangin also is a major crossroads for narcotics traffickers working in collaboration with the Taliban. The Taliban takeover of the District Centers (rough equivalent of "county seats") in Musa Qala and Sangin has been a source of embarrassment and concern for the GoA.

¶3. (S/NF) In early March, approximately 4,500 ISAF and 1,000 ANSF troops began to increase the pressure on the Taliban in Helmand with the commencement of shaping operations under Operation Achilles. This operation has constituted COMISAF's main effort, even as ISAF forces continue operations around Afghanistan in coordination with the ANSF under the ongoing umbrella of Operation Now Ruz ("New Year" in Dari). On April 4, ISAF and ANSF launched a new phase of Operation Achilles, to dislodge the Taliban from the Sangin District Center and their defensive positions in surrounding areas. The main force for this operation included more than 1,000 British, U.S., Dutch, Estonian, Danish, Canadian, and Afghan troops. By April 8, ISAF and ANSF forces had retaken the District Center and captured weapons caches (including significant amounts of IED materials) and met little resistance.

¶4. (S/NF) During shaping actions prior to as well as during this operation, the Taliban dispersed and fled the District Center, claiming publicly that its retreat was a "military tactic," and vowing to return. However, it is clear they have suffered an important defeat, with reports indicating the Taliban had planned but failed to execute a major counterattack. RC South Commander MG van Loon reports that the operation largely succeeded in avoiding major collateral

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damage, except to the District Center compound, which was heavily damaged. He also reports that morale among ISAF troops in Sangin is high, and that the UK platoon that had been pinned down in Sangin for months felt that their efforts to maintain an ISAF toehold in the district finally had been rewarded. COMMENT: As the Taliban dispersed from Sangin they moved to other areas of northern Helmand. ISAF and the ANSF are now planning other operations for the coming months to address other existing areas of Taliban influence. END COMMENT.

¶5. (S) The challenge will now be to secure the area and prevent Taliban reinfiltration. Coordination between the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) has improved since Operation Medusa in 2006 but challenges remain. Interagency coordination between the Afghan Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior remains difficult; the MOI initially delayed a contribution of 500 ANP for Sangin (and to reinforce Panjwayi, nearby in Kandahar) because a misunderstanding by officers in the Ministry of Defense caused MOD to fail to provide some necessary heavy weaponry. This will be the first time the ANP have supported an ISAF operation in significant numbers and it remains to be seen whether police leadership in RC South will be able to meet all of the obligations assigned them in the operational plan.

BOOST FOR KAJAKI DAM PROJECT

¶6. (S/NF) Even as plans for Operation Achilles were being finalized, the launch of the Kajaki Dam development project was underway. USAID contractors in Helmand are finalizing plans for the access road to the dam, a key step in the project. Helmand provincial Governor Wafa has delivered on his commitment to hold shuras to build support for the project and to help identify a site for the initial road construction camp. A site has been selected and is under construction. Construction of the new access road itself is expected to begin in early May. In addition, USAID is

considering some projects specifically requested for Lashkar Gah (capital of Helmand province) by Governor Wafa. Within the week, USAID plans to engage local shuras in Sangin to identify local reconstruction and development activities, primarily involving "cash for work," in order to demonstrate immediate positive results to the local population.

COMMENT: A MAJOR SUCCESS FOR ISAF AND GOA

17. (S/NF) The retaking of Sangin District Center is a major success for ISAF and the GoA. Afghan news headlines have emphasized the operation, and Sangin area residents reportedly have spoken to local media, supporting ISAF operations (Note: However, local Sangin elders apparently are not yet willing to emerge and be seen in public with ISAF. End Note). The ANA has once again demonstrated its ability to fight effectively alongside ISAF, and, along with the ANP, is moving in to take up positions in Sangin to consolidate the gains. ISAF and the GoA are looking at possibilities for further exploiting this success, both on the battlefield and in the political realm. We were even able to successfully carry out some significant poppy eradication activities in Helmand in a way that did not disrupt ISAF military operations. In the spirit of the March 29 visit of President Karzai to Lashkar Gah, where he engaged local elders and government officials, exhorting them to work toward national unity, we are working with ISAF to encourage senior GoA leaders to visit Sangin soon, to emphasize the government's engagement on the development/reconstruction front and to reinforce our Comprehensive Approach to combating the insurgency.

NEUMANN